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A Bad Person Leading a Costly Conflict: Saddam Hussein and the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War

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Introduction

> ***Since fear and love can hardly exist together, if we must chose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved.***[1]
>
> ***-- Niccolo Machiavelli***

Saddam Hussein was much like Adolf Hitler in his leadership philosophy…the ends justify the means, survival of the fittest, lack of personal empathy, and reduced respect for the value of human life.[2] Both transformed their nations into terrifying totalitarian regimes and undertook large scale acts of aggression upon their neighbors. Yet Hussein was different in two important ways. First, he has attempted to avoid prolonged conflict and irreparable damage to himself and his nation. He sued for peace within a few days of taking military action in the Iran-Iraq War and in his invasion of Kuwait. Second, he carries no ideological baggage. For Hussein, ideologies are simply tools to use to accomplish an end, such as becoming a more devout Muslim to garner support from religious leaders.[3] In the end, Hussein's most important objective is personal power—maintaining and expanding it.

After the overthrow of the Shah of Iran, Saddam Hussein and his regime came under attack from the new Iranian leadership. In the period leading to the conflict, Iranian fundamentalists were openly advocating his overthrow and were providing arms to Iraqi insurgents. Hussein's primary motivation in invading Iran was to defend himself from Iranian aggression.[4] However, he was also an ambitious opportunist who attempted to take advantage of the turmoil in Iran to secure areas adjacent to Iraq.[5] Occupying these areas could accomplish secondary objectives of gaining complete control of the Shat-al-Arab waterway, enlisting the support of Iraqi friendly populations inside Iran, consolidating his power within Iraq, and building prestige for himself within the Arab community. *With these objectives in mind, this paper will discuss Saddam Hussein's national security strategy, his military strategy and his effectiveness with them during the Iran-Iraq War.*

II. Saddam's National Security Strategy on the Eve of the War

> ***War, therefore, is an act of policy. Were it a complete, untrammeled, absolute manifestation of violence (as the pure concept would require), war would be of its own independent will usurp the place of policy the moment policy had brought being; it would then drive policy out of office and rule by the laws of its own nature… If we keep in mind that war springs from some political purpose, it is natural that the prime cause of its existence will remain the supreme consideration when conducting it.***[6]
>
> ***-- Carl Von Clausewitz***

Typical of many tyrants, Saddam Hussein was both the nation's political and military leader. He understood policy to be supreme. For better or worse, being both enabled him to rapidly change his objectives in adjusting to battlefield success or failure.[7] Sometimes this makes it difficult to distinguish between political and military objectives, or between political and military strategy. For Saddam, it meant too easily shifting emphasis from one to the other, sometimes at the expense of one, and ultimately, both.

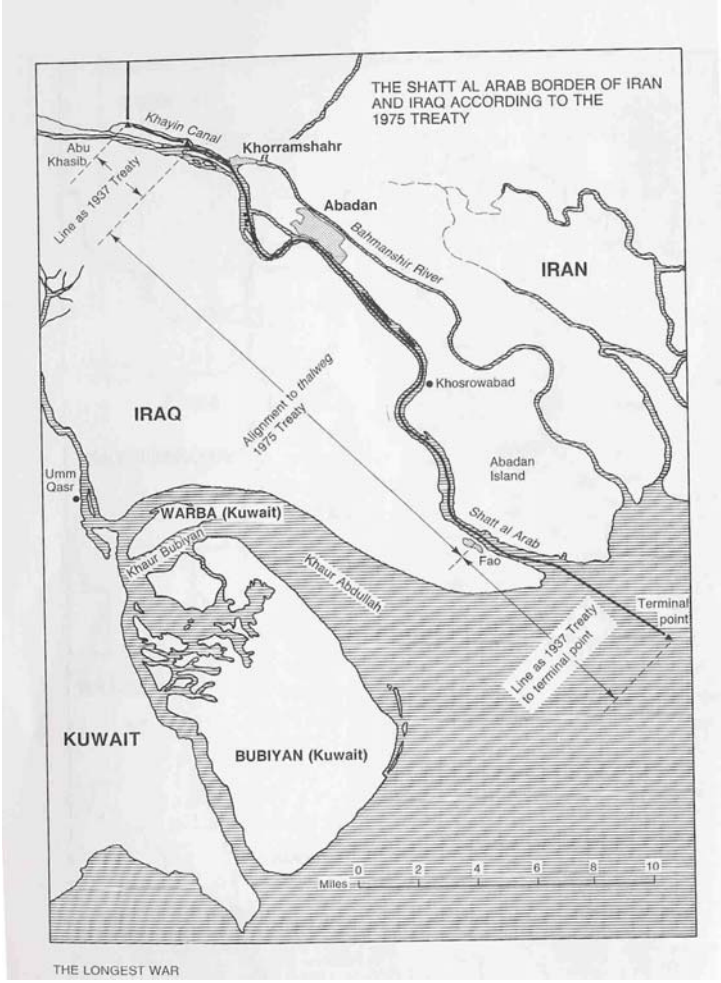
A. The Domestic and Regional Environment

An understanding of Saddam Hussein's secular Ba'athist regime within a regional context at the time of the Iranian revolution is central to any analysis of Iraqi national security strategy prior to the Iran-Iraq war. The regime's contentious relationship with the Shia population in the southern part of Iraq played a leading role in the evolving drama with Iran. This politically dispossessed but sizable group -- 60 percent of Iraq's population in 1980 -- had consistently opposed the Ba'athist regime. Once the Islamic fundamentalists took power in Iran, the Shias in Iraq found themselves with direct cultural and religious links to the leadership of Iraq's historic Persian rival.

The Ba'athists took power in Iraq in 1968. The party policy of deliberate separation of religion from the state theoretically provided a basis for support from Iraq's diverse communities (Sunni and Shi'a, Christian, Muslim, & even Kurdish minorities). Its secular emphasis – especially

as elaborated by Saddam Hussein—on the "cultural and civilizational aspects of Islam"— resulted in the regime having wider appeal in both Western and Arab worlds. However, Ba'athist success within Iraq was degraded by the harsh and uncompromising measures they took to solidify control of the country.

Ba'athist secular ideas stood in direct opposition to the principles of Islam held by fundamentalists, including the Shia Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran. For the fundamentalists, political power is subordinate to Islam, and Islamic "divine law" applies to the state.[8] The Ba'athist's relationship with longstanding rival Iran had tipped in the latter's favor in recent years with the 1975 Algiers Agreement[9] acknowledging Iran's superiority by "forcing" Iraq to share control of the Shatt al-Arab waterway.[10] In years previous, Iraqi significance in the Arab world had not been great, but Saddam Hussein had aspirations of greater Iraqi and personal influence in the Arab world.[11]



The Ba'athist rulers valued modernization and emphasized economic progress as a national priority. The regional oil boom brought significant opportunities to Iraq, and development of oil resources led to a surge in prosperity with tangible improvements in quality of life in the 1980's. The relatively less developed Shia areas in the southern part of the country were central to Iran's prosperity. It was there that the

regime developed previously unexploited oil fields. The Ba'athist's also developed economic infrastructure and industry, and funded education projects. However, local Shia leaders were often left out of the decision-making and development processes.[12] This resulted in the heightening of historic animosity between the Shias and the Sunni Muslim Ba'athists. Anti-regime demonstrations repeatedly resulted in harsh retaliatory actions, including executions of prominent Shia clerics. As the largest religious community in Iraq, the Shias were actively challenging the Ba'ath regime well before the Iranian Revolution.

Another important factor in understanding Iraqi strategy is the nature and timing of Saddam's rise to the top of the Ba'athist hierarchy. Saddam had been a party leader since Ba'athists captured power. Energetic and conspiratorial, he built a strong personal power base within the party, combining ruthless action with generosity toward large constituencies.[13] By July 1979, he took several steps to consolidate his position, some of them quite ruthless. In one instance, he alleged an anti-government plot on the part of some of his rival leaders. This resulted in the trial and subsequent execution of some of his closest previous allies. He maneuvered into the Presidency in July 1979, even though he was likely to have been given the role anyway.[14] Iraqi politics were thus characterized by an unusual amount of turmoil in 1979/1980, with a new and ambitious President who was consolidating his power internally and desired to broaden his influence.

B. National Interests and Objectives in the Wake of the Iranian Revolution

The February 1979 Iranian revolution was a watershed event in the Iran-Iraq balance of power. The two countries had a long history of mutual hostility, including armed conflict. Iran's larger size—in terms of population, territory, and resources—provided greater potential power. That Khomeini was not only a fundamentalist zealot, but also a Shia leader, complicated the

relationship between the rivals, and heightened Iraqi Shia expectations.[15] Saddam probably feared Iran as much as he hated it, and was wary of the hostile revolutionary movement expanding into Iraq. The revolution's success—and the subsequent positions taken by Iran's new leaders vis a vis Iraq—threatened Hussein and changed the relationship between the two nations. Saddam reacted, first to protect himself, and second to take advantage of Iran's turmoil.

The new government in Iran hoped to export its revolution throughout the Persian Gulf region. Given the number of Shias in Iraq, their mistreatment under the Ba'athists, the offensiveness of secularism to the fundamentalists, and the location of the holiest Shia shrines on Iraqi territory, Iraq was Iran's primary target for the export of its revolution.[16] Iran was actively aiding the Shias in Iraq, and the revolution coincided with a worrisome increase in Shia anti-government activities.

Iran's Islamic revolution was disruptive throughout the region:

> ***"Once Khomeini had achieved power at the head of a revolutionary movement he expounded a universalist view of Islam and revolution. Out of this soon flowed a series of appeals from Tehran that in Muslim lands Arab or state nationalism be eradicated, or subjugated, in order to achieve the higher unity of Islam."***[17]

Khomeini's ideas threatened other Gulf States, both internally (revolution/revolt) and externally (an Iranian-dominated Gulf). Understandably, the Iranian revolution was not viewed favorably by the Sunni-ruled Gulf entities, which feared that Iranian-generated Shia agitation might disrupt their regimes and oil-based economies. Iran enjoyed greater resources to draw upon—it is three times larger than Iraq in population and land, and dwarfs the other Gulf States. Of particular concern to Iraq was the possibility that Iran may attempt to actually annex Bahrain, which was 70 percent Shia. Destabilization in Bahrain could be used as a "reason" to attack Iraqi shipping and directing blows at the Iraqi economy.[18] Shared concern about Iran led to an improvement in Iraq's relations with the other Gulf States in 1979. Saddam offered to provide the manpower to protect the Gulf if others

provided funding. Some states, to include Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, accepted Saddam's offer and sent money.

By 1980, Khomeini's regime had shown that it could disrupt Iraq. There was speculation that Iranian leaders exporting revolution hoped to annex Shia areas (for example, the holy cities of Najaf and Sharbala) and support Shia opposition efforts to topple Saddam's government.[19] Iran threatened Iraq's basic national security interests: (1) the survival and stability of the Ba'athist regime; (2) the state's physical security against the efforts of internal and external opposition groups; and (3) overall economic prosperity as the foundation of secular state power. The Iranian revolution had clearly changed the nature of the threat environment.

Saddam's overriding concern was to maintain power, and he was willing to go to war to maintain it, if need be. Having just assumed the Presidency in July of 1979, his perceptions were undoubtedly colored by some anxiety and insecurity. At first, he employed non-military instruments in an attempt to reduce Iran's ability to subvert the Iraqi state. War was a step he was not yet ready to take. But Saddam was also an ambitious opportunist. He harbored aspirations to further consolidate his power and expand it into Iran.

C. Saddam's "Statecraft"

Though Saddam Hussein is not generally referred to as "a statesman," he did apply a number of instruments short of war to undercut Iranian subversion. Some of these instruments do not fit classical definitions of "statecraft," but others fall under generic statecraft strategies, such as diplomacy, information, covert action alliances and unconventional tools. In one way or another, the purpose of each instrument was to diminish the ability of the Iranian fundamentalist revolution to influence Iraq.

Diplomacy. Just after the revolution, Saddam welcomed the new regime, and took steps, such as invitations to visit Baghdad, to promote positive relations with Iran. He did this despite repeated negative statements from Iran about the Ba'athist regime. He also acted in a conciliatory fashion toward the Shias in Iran. He expressed interest in further economic development programs for them, and used religion (visits to shrines, symbolism in speeches, a pious attitude) in order to appeal to them and cultivate their sense of belonging to the Iraqi nation.[20] Finally, he reaffirmed his support of the 1975 Algiers Agreement.[21]

Information. Working through pro-Shah Iranians in Baghdad, Saddam used the media to reach Iranians with anti-Khomeini broadcasts, among other claims calling the Ayatollah a "turbaned Shah." Prominent Shah-era military and political figures were each provided radio stations in Iraq.[22]

Covert Action. Saddam encouraged separatist elements in Iran, among them minority movements in Baluchistan, Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. Most importantly, he supported the Arabs of Khuzistan, an area with strong cultural links to Iraq and containing much of Iran's oil wealth, perhaps with the ultimate hope of separating Khuzistan from the rest of Iran.[23] He also supported efforts by supporters of the deposed Shah, some of which had been leaders in the Shah's government, to overthrow Khomeini. Iran thwarted more than one attempted military coup in 1979.

Alliances. Appealing to shared concerns about the potential destabilizing impact of the revolutionary government in Iran, Saddam attempted to rally support from other Arab states, especially in the Gulf, and organize a unified Arab front to protect the smaller states from the "Persian menace."[24]

Unconventional Tools. Within Iraq, Saddam took ruthless internal measures to contain the perceived threat from Iran. He repressed the Shias by firing on demonstrators, arrest and imprisonment, and execution. Among those executed was a leading Shia cleric and his sister. He

also expelled 100,000 Iraqi Shias, as well as Iraqi nationals of Iranian descent and Iranian citizens.[25] Saddam became noticeably more draconian after the assassination attempt against Tariq Aziz.

These steps did not stop unrest within Iraq. The repression against the Shias resulted in increased anti-government activity. With the Iranian regime repeatedly urging and aiding the Iraqi population "to rise up and overthrow the Ba'ath regime,"[26] Shia groups in Iraq mounted a terrorist campaign within Iraq. To export its revolution, Iran resumed support (which had ended in 1975 under the terms of the Algiers Agreement) for Iraqi Kurd separatists and their terrorist efforts.

Given the fundamentalist fervor of the Iranian revolution, it is not surprising that Saddam did not reach accommodation with Khomeini. In the case of both conciliatory and violent measures against the Iraqi Shia, Saddam had tried both before with little success. The post-revolution environment would have made it extremely difficult for any leader to quell such an activist group, and next to impossible for Saddam to do so.

D. <u>The Decision to Go to War</u>

Frustrated with his "statecraft" efforts, Saddam turned to war. A series of border skirmishes, in which both sides participated more or less equally, set the stage for combat. Iranian leadership began calling for the death of the Iraqi leadership and the destruction of the regime. The assassination attempt against Tariq Aziz in April 1980 demonstrated the Iranians were willing to put actions behind their words: "it was probably in April 1980 that the Iraqi regime concluded that a major conflict was inevitable." [27] Iraq's initial decision to escalate from border clashes to full-scale war "was an incremental and rational process, taken only after the failure of other attempts to contain the Iranian threat."[28]

Saddam realized that he was dealing with a new Iran led by an ideologically-motivated actor who was unwilling to compromise his principle of exporting the fundamentalist revolution.

Iranian-supported Shia activism in Iraq was poised to plunge the country into a debilitating civil war.[29] Saddam perceived that Iran's ambitions included other states in the region, and this signaled a further threat to the oil-based prosperity of his nation. Eventually, Saddam determined that not going to war would risk the foundations of his Ba'athist regime. Going to war was a risk, but success in combat could result in better stability for Iraq.

Many observers believe that, at this point, Saddam broadened his strategic approach from defense against threats to national security, to a calculated attempt to use military means to bring political gain. Specifically, a military victory could restore the symbolically important Shatt al-Arab—over which hostilities dated back centuries—to Iraqi control, and perhaps secure other territorial gains, such as oil-rich pro-Iraqi Khuzistan. Furthermore, military success could enhance Saddam's prestige as a leader of the Arab world, changing the regional balance of power in Iraq's favor. Some disagree with this view, and believe that Saddam was motivated only by anxiety and not by any wider ambitions.[30] However, as a recently installed President attempting to consolidate his position and make his mark, using the war to achieve wider ambitions—at least as secondary objectives—would have been a rational choice. Saddam's history of opportunistic power grabs within Iraq is consistent with this interpretation.

When the war began in September 1980, Saddam could reasonably have calculated that the diplomatic and military balance was in his favor. Despite Iran's historic military superiority, its armed forces had fractionalized and there were signs of conflict in the revolutionary government. The revolution and the taking of American hostages in 1979 had isolated Iran from much of the world; other Arab states were sympathetic to Iraq's plight; the United States, Iran's primary source of military support, did not back the revolutionary regime; and, Iran's economy was declining. Finally, recently deposed Iranian military and political leaders were providing Saddam with important information and links to a network of anti-revolution groups still in Iran. The alignment

of these factors provided an opportunity that might perish if Saddam failed to move quickly. He probably calculated that Iraq could survive a short, limited war without major harm, and with its prosperity intact.

However, Saddam did not anticipate the Iranians' fervor and enmity. For whatever reason, Saddam failed to properly assess Iran's aggressive reaction. Saddam underestimated the government's dedication to protect and expand its revolution. While Saddam might pursue a limited conflict, Khomeini would not.[31] For Khomeini, the war became God's hidden gift. He used it as something to continue the revolution, seeing himself as the liberator of Muslims in both the Eastern and Western blocs. Khomeini did not want to occupy Iraq…he wanted to rid it of tyrannical rulers.[32]

III. Saddam's Military Strategy

> ***If we keep in mind that war springs from some political purpose, it is natural that the prime cause of its existence will remain the supreme consideration in conducting it. That, however, does not imply that the political aim is a tyrant. It must adapt itself to its chosen means, a process which can radically change it; yet the political aim remains the first consideration. Policy, then, will permeate all military operations, and insofar as their violent nature will admit, it will have a continuous influence on them[33].***
>
> ***-- Carl Von Clausewitz***

As noted Saddam Hussein was both the political and military leader. It was he who allowed the political aim to be tyrant at the beginning of the war.[34] Instead of his initial military strategy dealing a mortal blow to the Iranian Army, he restricted his army's goals, means and targets. Saddam's mistaken belief about weak Iranian will was compounded by his failure to grasp the operational requirements of such a campaign. Rather than allowing his forces the freedom to advance until they had won a decisive victory, Saddam halted them within a week and announced he was willing to talk.[35]

The political decision not to exploit early success resulted in dire consequences and reversed the course of the war. It saved the Iranian Army from decisive defeat, allowed the Iranian Army precious time to regroup and reorganize, and devastated Iraqi Army morale. More importantly it did nothing to threaten Khomeini and actually provided him a platform to launch his revolution to areas outside Iran.[36] Although he would do better adapting policy to military realities later in the war, his failure to do so at the start resulted in disaster and unnecessary suffering.

A. "Flexible" Objectives

Military Objectives. Objectives remained important, but fluid. Saddam adjusted his military (and political) objectives in light of his military's performance on the battlefield.[37] He initially declared his aim was to seize the Iranian half of the Shatt al-Arab waterway. But once military operations proved more promising, Iraqi leadership declared they would "continue to capture cities of Khuzistan and appropriating Iranian oil." The Iraqi press, a tool of the Iraqi government, routinely described Khuzistan / Arabistan as a province of Iraq. By the spring of 1981, Iraqi leadership indicated they were unconcerned if Iran disintegrated. However, one year later, with his military success on the decline, Saddam Hussein explained victory as merely "defending ourselves until the other side gives up."[38] His military objective shifted to defending pre-war Iraqi territory, minimizing Iraqi casualties, and maximizing Iranian costs—both militarily and economically. Defending Iraq proper proved to be much more popular with the Iraqi people than fighting inside Iran. Most groups within Iraq rallied to Saddam's effort. "Outlasting" the Iranian will to fight remained Saddam's primary objective until nearly the end of the war when he launched a series of counteroffensives to exploit Iranian weakness.[39]

Centers of Gravity. Hussein assessed the primary center of gravity to be the Iranian will to fight. However, he was unable to affect Iranian will in the short term. Iran in revolution, even with

a military in some chaos, was more than willing to aggressively defend and pursue a conventional war. In the long term, however, Hussein was able to effectively impact Iranian will and this eventually resulted in a cease-fire agreement. Khomeini determined the Iraqi center of gravity was Saddam Hussein and his goal was to remove him. However, centers of gravity are often centers of strength and well protected. Khomeini was unable to overwhelm Hussein.

B. Military Capabilities and Vulnerabilities

Assumptions. Both nations made assumptions. Saddam assumed Iran would be unable and/or unwilling to mount a credible defense and agree to quick cease-fire and negotiations. Iran assumed its revolution's fervor and righteousness would be capable of defeating a tyrannical government with a "suppressed" Shia majority. Both assumptions proved erroneous and a protracted conflict resulted.

Balance of Forces. At the beginning of the conflict the Iraqi and Iranian armies were roughly equivalent in numbers. The Iraqis enjoyed a modest advantage in the number of active duty soldiers while the Iranians enjoyed some advantage in total air, naval and reserve forces. In military preparedness including command and control, Iraq held a definite advantage. Although Iran's military forces were not as degraded as Saddam believed, they were in disarray. During the revolution, many Iranian military leaders had been removed and/or executed while many other Iranian regulars deserted service. In addition, the Iranian military was largely outfitted with American equipment. After the fall of the Shah and the subsequent American hostage crisis, Iran was unlikely to get the parts needed to keep its more sophisticated American equipment serviceable.[40]

Iraq was a nation with only one third the population of Iran…13 million people to Iran's 40 million. If forced into a long-term conflict, Iran could gain the advantage. To hold its own, Iraq

had to dedicate a much greater portion of population and gross national product in prosecuting the war. Overall Iran spent not more than 12 percent of its gross domestic product on the war whereas Iraq spent 57 percent. While Iranian leaders were heavy in rhetoric, they failed to dedicate the

investment to their fielded forces. Iraq also placed a much greater percentage of its population in arms…1 million active duty out of a population of 13 million. This compares with Iran's 650,000 active duty out of a population of 40 million.[41]

Iran, still in the throes of consolidating revolutionary success, did enjoy a national "passion" which enabled it to rally its people and military for an extended period of time. This also enabled human-wave tactics, which when used as a part of a combined arms assault, became fairly effective.

The Iraqi Air Force had been hamstrung by Saddam's paranoia of coup.[42] Saddam only allowed his pilots minimum flying time and this proved costly during the war. Air power was effective only in some roles with marginal performance when directly supporting surface forces. Lacking the required proficiency, the Iraqis failed to effectively strike the Iranian Air Force during initial attacks[43], did not assure Iraqi air superiority over its own airspace[44] and was largely unable to conduct combined arms assaults with its army.[45] In many instances, the Iraqi Air Force was held in "strategic reserve." However, Iraqi air power was effective in the role of strategic attack—in striking economically and politically sensitive Iranian targets. In this way air power played a critical role by significantly elevating Iranian "pain" in Saddam's counter-value strategy.

The Iranian Air Force had problems similar to Iraq, but was also hampered by significant parts shortages. While the Iraqi Air Force grew from 335 to 484 aircraft during the conflict, the Iranian Air Force was reduced from 445 aircraft to 90.[46]

On the other hand, the Iranian Navy was somewhat effective, keeping Iraqis out of the Gulf and conducting some effective attacks against targets on land. However, Iranian naval effectiveness was limited by its lack of air superiority and unable to stop Iraqi air strikes. Iraqi aircraft routinely controlled the skies over Iranian maritime assets. The Iranian Navy was also constrained by outside powers that would not allow it to deny shipping through the Persian Gulf.[47]

The Iraqi Navy was at a disadvantage. For most of the war it did not play a significant role and was bottled up within its own territorial waters. Later in the war, the Iraqis were able to employ in a limited degree. However, Iraqi air power was effective in a maritime role. During 1985 alone, Iraq struck 124 "hostile" maritime targets (often tankers) and conducted 77 major raids against Kharg Island.[48]

C. Strategy of Limiting Risk and Escalating Punishment

Once committed to conflict, Saddam began with an offensive strategy. This was followed with a defensive / punishment strategy when Iranians proved resolute, and then near the end of the conflict, taking advantage of Iranian weakness, Saddam conducted limited counteroffensive operations.

Saddam Hussein initially envisioned a limited conflict and wanted to avoid a protracted war if at all possible. He attempted to take advantage of an Iranian regime he considered to be weak and disorganized, both militarily and politically. While his primary objective to defend himself and Iraq from Iranian aggression remained the highest priority, other more opportunistic objectives were sought as long as the cost of realizing those objectives remained low. When Iran demonstrated more resolve and ardor than Saddam anticipated, Saddam retreated to his primary objective. With Iraqi security primarily in mind, Hussein limited his initial offensive actions in Iran. Within a week after the offensive began, Hussein offered a cease-fire and negotiations. When Iran refused the peace offered by Saddam and initiated a full-scale counteroffensive, Saddam changed his objectives. Iraq then committed to waiting out the Iranian desire to fight, defending Iraq proper, and bleeding the Iranian military as it assaulted Iraqi fortified positions.

Offensive Phase. The Iraqi offensive phase began in September 1980 and continued until Saddam's withdrawal from most Iranian territory in June 1982. By the end of October, the Iraqi

Army had taken most of the territory it would gain. Although it continued with some offensive efforts (attacks on Susangard, seige of Abadan and a counter-offensive in the southern region), Iraq began trying to consolidate and defend what it had taken.[49] Due to defensive concerns, Saddam did not dedicate the majority of his forces to offensive action…even during the initial campaign. Baghdad is only 75 miles from the Iranian border and Saddam withheld 7 of his 12 divisions for

defense. These divisions also provided additional security from internal threats. With unrest within his own nation, Saddam likely felt uncomfortable moving too much of his army too far away.

In January 1982 Iranian offensives within the Dezful-Susangard area were contained, but with heavy losses on both sides. By December, Iran broke the siege of Abadan and retook areas north of Susangard. In March 1982, the Iranians expelled Iraq from the Dezful-Shush area.[50] The next month, Saddam, hoping to secure a peace, announced his intention to withdraw from all Iranian territories if Iran agreed to cease hostilities. The Iranians rejected this and Saddam then unilaterally declared Iraqi forces would be withdrawn from Iran. By the end of the offensive phase—June 1982—Iraq retired the bulk of its forces to pre-war borders and fortified its positions.[51]

Defensive/Punishment Strategy. The Iranians, unwilling to agree to United Nations resolutions for peace, were forced to act offensively against Iraqi fortifications or quit the war. Well entrenched, Saddam escalated the level of Iranian pain until the Iranians eventually agreed to the UN resolution Saddam sought. The Iraqi defensive posture resulted in much greater Iranian casualties and minimized Iraqi losses to the greatest extent possible. Lacking Iraqi technical sophistication and the associated firepower, Iranian human waves were employed against the fixed Iraqi positions. These waves were led by thousands of Basij volunteers who walked over minefields to clear them and to draw the enemy's fire.[i] Once the Basij absorbed the initial Iraqi firepower, Iranian regulars would follow-up to exploit any loss in the integrity of Iraqi lines.[52]

Even though Iraq was suffering as many as 1200 casualties a month, Saddam's defensive effort helped to better unite the Iraqi people behind him. In addition to placing his ground forces in a defensive posture, when he did take ground offensive action, it was on Iraqi terms, and several times with the use of non-persistent chemical weapons to break down the Iranian position first.[53]

[i] The Basij was formed after the revolution as a civil defense force, but in practice became a grass roots intelligence organization made of young boys between the ages of ten and sixteen and during the war, unemployed old men, some in their eighties. The youths were targeted through schools and an intensive media campaign.

Saddam used other forces such as air power and surface-to-surface missiles in a counter-value strategy. The important military objectives within his counter-value strategy included important economic nodes—oil refineries, oil tankers, and petroleum storage areas—and eventually the Iranian people themselves.[54] The Iraqi leader used a combination of air power and later in the war, ballistic missiles to accomplish these ends. In the Persian Gulf, Iraq deployed French Super-Entendard aircraft with Exocet missiles to attack oil tankers. Saddam initially launched missiles to attack border cities and later, cities in the heart of Iran, to include Tehran, were attacked.[55]

Over time Saddam's tactics were effective. By the beginning of 1988 the front had stagnated. Iranian soldiers were deserting and new volunteers were not coming forward. Iran was experiencing significant economic problems from a combination of the Iraqi attacks, international isolation and the cost of prosecuting the war. Both military and civilian communities became demoralized.[56] Western countries and the Soviet Union continued to supply Iraq with conventional weaponry on Persian Gulf nation supplied credit, but Iran had difficulty even buying arms on the black market at even back-breaking prices.[57] Along with continued air strikes, at the end of February 1988, Iraq began launching a series of missile attacks on Tehran. The strikes resulted in ¼ of the population evacuating the city—to include government officials. Iranian citizens left behind resented their government's inability to protect them.[58]

Counteroffensive. Continuing the punishment campaign, Iraq took advantage of Iranian weakness to make territorial gains.[59] Several times, Iraq employed chemical munitions to support its efforts. In the spring of 1988, Iraq then drove the Iranians from the hard-won Faw Peninsula.[60] Around the same time, the U.S. Navy destroyed and/or damaged two Iranian oil rigs, two frigates, and a missile boat. Iraq repulsed Iranian initiatives in the north employing chemical weapons, but Iran was afraid to counter with their own chemicals. Iranian leaders were afraid Iraq would escalate

by placing chemical munitions on the Scud Missiles striking Iranian cities.[61] Iraq continued firing missiles at cities, ultimately out numbering Iranian launches 200 to 77.

From May through July, Iraq enjoyed successful offensive gains in the Shalamche region, Mehran, Majnoon Islands, Mawet, Panjwin, and Musian.[62] Mehdi Barzargan, the Iranian Provisional Prime Minister after the overthrow of the Shah and religious moderate, wrote an open letter in the spring of 1988. It stated, "If you [Khomeini] think we should sacrifice our lives and our rights to export and impose Islam by war…you are free to think this way…but not at the cost of the lives of those who do not think in this way…"[63]

The last straw was when an American warship accidentally shot down an Iranian airliner on 3 July 1988, killing 290 civilians. The Iranian government, if not Khomeini himself, decided Iran could take no more. On 18 July 1988, Iran declared it would accept U.N Resolution 598…the war ended.[64]

D. Pain with Limited Gain

U.N. Resolution 598 stated there would be an immediate cease-fire between forces, prisoners would be returned, and the armies would retreat along recognized pre-war borders.[65] However, Iraq argued the pre-war borders did not include the 1975 Treaty (which it had abrogated) and assumed military positions roughly along the pre-1975 line. As a result, Iraq did make some territorial gains. Approximately 920 square miles of land came under Iraqi control that was beyond the recognized border before the war.[66] It should be noted that when significant conflict with the Allied Coalition during Operation DESERT SHIELD/STORM looked to be inevitable, Saddam, in an effort to fully terminate hostilities with Iran, returned these territorial "gains." This essentially recognized the 1975 Algiers Agreement.[67]

As the war came to dominate Iraqi society, Saddam was able to use the conflict to consolidate his own position within the nation. Iraq became a much more militaristic state then it

would have otherwise been. Saddam encouraged a "service to country" attitude to dominate society and the military to become the core institution of the ruling party. Party cadres were instructed to promote military values with discipline, patriotism, and martyrdom as core values. Saddam discovered defending Iraq proper brought a degree of national unity he had not expected. Ethnic and religious groups throughout Iraq, with the exception of the Kurds, placed most sectarian concerns aside and fell behind the defense effort. Shia insurrection efforts were generally diverted or supressed.[68]

IV. Political Conclusions: Who Was the Winner?

> ***There is a right kind of victory and a wrong kind of victory, just as there are wars for the right things and wars that are wrong from every standpoint…***[69]
>
> ***-- Harry S Truman***

Eventually, Saddam Hussein realized the primary objective he sought—to defend himself and Iraq from Iranian aggression. He also realized some of his secondary objectives. He consolidated his power within Iraq and gained some prestige in the Arab world for stopping Iranian fundamentalist expansion.[70] He did halt the "Persian Horde" and fundamentalism from further immediate expansion. However, he failed in his other secondary objectives—securing complete control of the Shatt al-Arab Waterway and enlisting support of Iraqi friendly areas within Iran. Iraq paid a very stiff price in both economic and military terms. Before the conflict Iraq was on an economic boom with strong prospects of being a regional economic and political leader. After the war, Iraq faced debt and had generally lost ground politically within the world community. With the exception of its adversary Iran, Iraq also suffered more combat casualties than almost any third world country in the twentieth century…hundreds of thousands dead, wounded or captured.

In defending his regime, Saddam Hussein first tried reach a non-military accommodation with Iranian leaders. When that failed he escalated the conflict with a conventional invasion of

western Iraq. Hopeful that a limited campaign would persuade the Iranians to agree to peace, Saddam inappropriately surrendered military initiative that resulted in the loss of his chance to exploit initial military success. He also misjudged Iranian determination to overthrow him. His military hesitancy and Iranian determination resulted in prolonged conflict.

Once Saddam accepted Iraq was committed to war for an extended period, he began making more effective decisions. He employed effective statecraft to garner international financial, political, and material support for his war effort. He assumed a defensive posture that minimized Iraqi casualties. He accurately assessed the Iranian center of gravity to be its "will to prosecute the war" and initiated a ruthless strategic attack campaign to break it. Eventually he was successful.

So did Saddam Hussein win? Yes, and he remains in power today. But the better question is did Iraq win? No, the Iraqi people lost nearly all the way around—they realized death, a lower standard of living, and a more militarized society. In addition, a tyrant remained in power, who would within three years, bring them once again to war with disastrous results. After invading Kuwait, an ally that financially supported Iraq during its conflict with Iran, the Iraqi people were forced to endure worldwide condemnation, thorough military defeat, destruction of their economy, economic embargoes and finally, occupation of their airspace to this day. Saddam—winner, Iraqi people—losers.

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[1] John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations*, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company), 655.
[2] Efraim Karsh & Inari Rautsi, *SaddamHussein: A Political Biography* (New York: Free Press/MacMillan, 1991), 267.
[3] Ibid, 268.
[4] Ibid, 147-148.
[5] Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 39.
[6] Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 87.
[7] Hiro, 254.
[8] Ibid, 31-32.
[9] This treaty was an agreement reached between the Shah of Iran and the Iraqi Government. Saddam Hussein, as the power behind the Iraqi Presidency, worked the agreement for Iraq. In essence the agreement recognizes Iranian sovereignty over half of the Shatt al-Arab Waterway. In it Iran promises to stop supporting insurgencies within Iraq. Informally, this agreement essentially recognizes Iranian supremacy in the Persian Gulf region at that time.
[10] Karsh & Rautsi, 83.
[11] Ibid, 109, 124, 130, 133, 134.

[12] Stephen C. Pelletiere, "Iraq's Decision to Go to War," Chapter 2 in *The Iran-Iraq War: Chaos in a Vacuum* (New York: Praeger, 1992), 24-25.
[13] Hiro, 30.
[14] Pelletiere, 28.
[15] Karsh & Rautsi, 144.
[16] Karsh & Rautsi, 138; Hiro, 28.
[17] Hiro, 34.
[18] Pelletiere, 30.
[19] Robbins, 46.
[20] Karsh & Rautsi, 144; Hiro, 34.
[21] Karsh & Rautsi, 134.
[22] Karsh & Rautsi, 145; Hiro, 36.
[23] Robbins, 47.
[24] Karsh & Rautsi, 145.
[25] Karsh & Rautsi, 146; Hiro, 35.
[26] Karsh, 221.
[27] Robbins, 46-7.
[28] Karsh, 218.
[29] Hiro, 37.
[30] This position is most clearly articulated by Efraim Karsh, in "Military Lessons of the Iran-Iraq War," *Orbis* (Spring 1989), 209-223.
[31] William O. Staudenmaier, "A Strategic Analysis," in *The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts*, edited by Shirin Tahir-Kheli and Shaheen Ayubi (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983), 47.
[32] Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (New York: St. Martin's Press) 251.
[33] Clausewitz, 87.
[34] Hiro, 48.
[35] Karsh & Rautsi, 148.
[36] Karsh & Rautsi, 149.
[37] Hiro, 254.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Karsh & Rautsi, 157-158; John Pimlott & Stephen Badsey, *The Gulf War Assessed*, (London: Arms & Armour Press), 29-31.
[40] Ronald Bergquist, *The Role of Airpower in the Iran-Iraq War* (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: Air University Press), 49.
[41] Hiro, 4, 297, 299.
[42] Ibid, 48.
[43] Bergquist, 59.
[44] Hiro, 48.
[45] Bergquist, 59.
[46] Hiro, 297, 299.
[47] Ibid, 130-131, 160.
[48] Ibid, 147.
[49] Ibid, 288.
[50] Ibid, 289.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Moin, 249-250.
[53] Hiro, 222; Karsh & Rautsi, 156-157.
[54] Pimlott & Badsey, 28.
[55] Moin, 251.
[56] Pimlott & Badsey, 32.
[57] Moin, 267.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Pimlott & Badsey, 31.
[60] Ibid, 31.
[61] Moin, 268.
[62] Hiro, 294-295.
[63] Moin, 268.

[64] Ibid, 269.
[65] Hiro, 309.
[66] Ibid, 296.
[67] Pimlott & Badsey, 47.
[68] Karsh & Rautsi, 157-158.
[69] Bartlett, 137.
[70] Hiro, 4.